A History of the Marconi Company. By W. J. Baker. London: Methuen. 1970. Pp. 414. Plates. £5.

For the first twenty years of its life, the Marconi Company was virtually synonymous with the British radio industry, and at no time since has it been less than a giant, albeit sometimes a sick one. Its affairs have been involved and controversial, its products varied and sophisticated. In short, its history provides enough material to fill several books, and Mr. Baker has had to squeeze hard to confine the story within a single volume.

The preface states that a main objective of the writing was that students of industrial history should find something of value in the account. They will undoubtedly do so, not merely because of its wealth of important material, but also because Mr. Baker makes a very good job of explaining to the non-specialist the technical considerations underlying events and policies. Unfortunately, however, the book's value to scholars is inevitably reduced by the absence of any references. No doubt this is because most of the sources were internal to the company, and many of them verbal at that; but it does on occasions leave us uncertain as to whether a statement is fact or conjecture.

When, as here, the history of a company is written by one of its employees, it is pertinent to ask what position the work occupies between two possible extremes—the relentlessly critical appraisal and the public-relations exercise. A glance at Mr. Baker's later chapters, where partiality is most to be feared, is reassuring. They are commendably objective in tone, even though on two occasions the Company is wrongly credited with supplying equipment for important projects.

There is a refreshing candour, for example, in the quoted words of a contemporary senior executive who described the company as producing, just after the 1939-45 war, equipments "with a price a little too high, a delivery a little too long, and a specification not quite in line with the customer's requirements". Unhappily, the objectivity seems to decline rather abruptly as we pass back into the 1920's, when the author must have run out of first-hand witnesses, and the tone of the earlier chapters is often too devotional. For example, in one passage, to which my attention was drawn by an expert in the period, partiality and undue brevity combine to give a misleading impression. The book briefly summarizes, and wholeheartedly condemns, the report published in 1920 by the Norman Committee; this reviewed the prospects for an Imperial

Wireless Scheme, and rejected proposals that had been submitted by the Marconi Company. The committee supported its conclusions with evidence and arguments that one might reasonably expect a present-day historian either to refute or concede; in the event, they are simply not mentioned.

The general reader will find the book a good story well told, though he may wish that the author had allowed himself more anecdotes—the few given are very entertaining and illuminating—at the expense of occasional arid patches detailing successive equipments, contracts won, or premises extended. The presentation is pleasing, and the simplified circuits in the early chapters most helpful.

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